Perception and Factors Influencing Early Marriage in a Semi-Urban Community of Sokoto State, North-West Nigeria.

Adamu H[1], Yusuf A[2], Tunau K[3], Yahaya M[1]

[1]Department of Community Health, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, Nigeria
[2]College of Health Sciences, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, Nigeria
[3]Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

Background: Most communities have a minimum age set for marriage, and in many of these communities the age is too low, especially for girls. This study assessed the perception and factors influencing early marriage in a semi-urban community of Sokoto state, Nigeria. **Methods**: It was a descriptive cross-sectional study that surveyed heads of households within Illela LGA of Sokoto state who have given out at least one girl for marriage. Multistage sampling technique was used to select 60 participants and data was sought using semi-structured questionnaires. Data were analysed using the IBM SPSS version 20 and Ms Excel 2007. **Results:** The mean age of respondents was 48 years ±9, about 88% were of the Hausa/Fulani tribe and 96.7% were Muslims. Up to 61.7% of them perceive early marriage as a good practice. About 97% reported early marriage as a common practice in the area and more than 68% of them had given out at least one girl for marriage before the age of 18 years. Their major reasons for practicing early marriage were religious belief and prevention of sexual promiscuity. Complications due to early marriage were reported by 16.7% of the respondents and about 70% of the complications were said to be prolonged obstructed labour. **Conclusion**: Majority of the respondents considered early marriage a good practice. Religious belief and prevention of sexual promiscuity were the driving force behind its practice. Creating awareness among parents and educating the girl child will help in reducing hazards associated with it.

Keywords: Early marriage, Perception, Factors influencing, Sokoto.

INTRODUCTION

In most societies, marriage marks the point in a woman's life when childbearing first becomes socially acceptable. Women who marry early will, on average, have longer exposure to pregnancy and a greater number of lifetime births. Marriage is a social activity entered into through a public act, religious or traditional ceremony and it reflects the purpose, character, and customs of the society in which it is found.[1] It unites people in a special form of mutual dependence for the purpose of founding and maintaining a family. Many societies have norms that limit the age of young girls to enter into marriage, but in some cases the age limit does not take into consideration their physiological and psychological readiness for childbearing.[1]

Name & Address of Corresponding Author
Dr. Adamu H
Department of Community Health,
Usmanu Danfodiyo University,
Sokoto,
Nigeria.

Early marriage is a traditional practice that may predisposes girls to sexual relationship and early childbearing with an older spouse, thus adversely affecting girls' health, and general development.[2] Early marriage may also increase girls' vulnerability to other forms of violence within the home. Essentially, it is both a human rights and public health problem. Early marriage is now widely recognized as a violation of children's rights, a direct form of discrimination against the girl child who as a result of the practice is often deprived of her basic rights to health, education, development and equality.[2]

Most countries, including Nigeria, have declared 18 years as the minimum legal age of marriage.[3] Despite the sanctions on child marriage however, more than 100 million girls are expected to marry in the next decade.[4] Up to 700 million women alive today (roughly 10% of the world's population) were married before their 18th birthday; and more than one in three (about 250 million) were married before the age of 15, reveals new UNICEF data on child marriage.[3]

The extent of early marriage varies between countries and regions.[5] In Latin America and the

Carribean, 29% of young women were married by age of 18 years.[6] In Southern Asia 48% (nearly 10 million) of young women were married before the age of 18 years. In India, almost half (44.5%) of women aged 20-24 years got married before they reach eighteen years.[7] In Bangladesh, 45% of young women between 25 and 29 years were married between the age of 10 and 14 years.[6] Studies have shown that approximately half of Yemeni girls are married before 18 years of age, while some as young as eight years.[8]

According to International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), in Niger, Chad and Mali, more than 70% of girls are married off before 18 years of age.[9] In Tanzania, 5.3% of the respondents said early marriage is below 14 years and 44.4% said it is below 18 years of age.[9] In Mali 42.5% and 41.1% of respondents said that marriage is not early if the girl has started menstruating and she is physically grown.[10] About 7.2% of respondents in a study in Mali reported that 18 years and above is the ideal age for marriage for girls.[10]

While the practice has decreased globally over the last 30 years, it remains common in rural areas and especially in northern Nigeria. Forty three percent of girls are married off before their 18th birthday, 17% are married before they turn 15. There is wide variation in the prevalence of early marriage from one region to another, with the northwest having the highest prevalence (76%) and the southeast having the lowest (10%).[3] In Nigeria, early marriage is driven by factors such as poverty, poor educational attainment and strong social and religious factors. Education has an inverse relationship with early marriage; up to 82% of women with no education were married before 18 years of age, as opposed to 13% of women who had at least finished secondary education.[3]

Even though the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria did not establish a minimum age of marriage, the Child Rights Act of 2003 sets the age of marriage at 18 years. However, only 23 of Nigeria's 36 states have taken concrete steps to implement the minimum age of marriage. As a result, in some parts of Nigeria, the minimum age of marriage can be as low as 12 years old.[3]

Early marriage is associated with a lot of medical, psychological and socio-economic consequences on the girl child and indeed her family. It is related to poverty and early pregnancy. During pregnancy, maternal malnutrition, anemia, poor antenatal care attendance and eclampsia are likely to occur. Deliveries are mainly unsupervised and prolonged obstructed labour frequently ensues. Complications like development of vesico-vaginal fistula (VVF) and foot drop are commonly seen. In addition to all these the girls may end up as school dropouts divorced and ostracized.[11] Despite these problems early marriage remains high, especially in the northern part of Nigeria. This study therefore, looked at early marriage from the perspective of male parents, with respect to their perception and possible factors influencing their practice.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study area
The study was conducted in Illela local government area (LGA) of Sokoto state, noth-west Nigeria. The LGA, which is about 84km north of the state capital has an estimated population of about 186,606, with male:female ratio slightly in favour of males. Majority of its occupants are Hausa/Fulani and Islam is their predominant religion.[12]

Study population
The study population consisted of heads of households in Illela LGA.

Inclusion criteria
Household heads that have given out at least one girl out for marriage

Study design
It was a descriptive cross-sectional study.

Sample size determination
Sample size was estimated using the formula for sample size estimation for descriptive studies ($n=Z^2pq/d2$).[13] Using 3.2% prevalence as reported in a previous study,[14] a sample size of 49 was obtained. A response rate of 80% was anticipated, thus the sample size was adjusted to 60.

Sampling technique
Multistage sampling technique was used as follows: Selection of one ward out of the ten political wards in Illela LGA by simple random sampling technique (by balloting). From the selected ward, 3 settlements were selected by systematic sampling technique (k=5) and from each of the selected settlements, 20 households were selected also using systematic sampling technique.

Data collection
A semi-structured interviewer administered questionnaire was used in data collection. The questionnaire sought information on respondents' socio-demographic characteristics, perception and practice of early marriage. The questionnaire was pre-tested and validated following a pilot survey conducted in Kalambaina town, in Wamakko LGA of Sokoto state. Six research assistants (medical students) who were trained on the process of data collection assisted in the collection of data.

Data analysis
The data were analyzed using statistical package for social science (SPSS) version 20 and Ms Excel 2007. For continuous variables, mean and standard deviation were calculated and for categorical variables, frequency and percentage were calculated. Chi-square was used to determine the association between categorical variables and the level of statistical significance was set at 5% ($P<0.05$).

Ethical consideration

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the ethics and research committee of Usmanu Danfodiyo University Teaching Hospital (UDUTH), Sokoto. The purpose of the study was duly explained to the respondents and their informed consents were obtained before administering the questionnaire.

RESULTS

The age of the respondents ranged from 30-79 years with mean of 48 years ±9.95. Those having age between 40-49 years were the most represented (41.7%) and majority (88.3%) were Hausa/Fulani. Up to 96.7% of them were Muslims and 35% had up to tertiary level of education [Table 1].

Close to 40% of the respondents said a father alone should decide when his daughter should get married. About 78% of them agreed that a girl child has other roles to play apart from reproductive role and 70% believe in early marriage because Islam allows it; 26.8% said it removes promiscuity and unwanted pregnancy. Early marriage was perceived as a bad practice by 31.7% of the respondents and about 36% of those that see early marriage as a risky behaviour felt it predisposes to formation of fistula; 19.4% said it denies right to education and 2.8% said it predisposes to STDs. Up to 56.7% of the respondents believe the ideal age for marriage should be less than 18 years of age and majority (71.7%) feel government should not make a law that prohibits early marriage [Table 2].

About 52%of the respondents reported that early marriage is any marriage below 14 years of age while 40% of them said that early marriage is below 18 years of age. Up to 61.7% said marriage is not early if a girl is physically grown up and 63.3% said it is not early if a girl has started menstruating, irrespective of her age. About 55% of the respondents said they know the legal age of marriage in Nigeria and up to 72.7% of them knew it correctly [Table 2]. About 97% of the respondents reported early marriage as a common practice in the region and more than 68% of them have given their daughters for marriage before 18 years of age. Among the girls given out for marriage, only 20% had up to secondary school education while 40% attended Quranic School only. Religious belief (Islam) was the major reason for practicing early marriage as reported by 73.2% of the respondents; however, for 12.2% of them, the reason was to protect the girl from sexual promiscuity. About 83% of the early marriages were arranged by the parents and 16.7% were arranged by the grandparents. For the majority of the respondents (62.5%) who gave their girls as a result of promise, the marriage was before the age of 18. About 10% of the respondents have married out their daughters against their wish [Table 3].

Ten (16.7%) of the respondents said their daughters have had complications ranging from prolonged obstructed labour (70%) to birth asphyxia (30%), perineal tear (20%) and psychosocial problems (10%). However, up to 80% those that reported complications did not attribute it to consequence of early marriage [Table 4].

Regarding perceived prevalence of early marriage, 60% of the respondents said they have witnessed marriage they considered early marriage in the community. With respect to actual prevalence of early marriage, 68% of them have married out their daughters before the age of 18 years [Figure 1].

The practice of early marriage was significantly influenced by the age of the respondents (p = 0.006) and their tribe (p = 0.003). Also, among those that see early marriage as a good thing, 81.1% of them have practiced early marriage (p=0.003); moreover, 83.3% of the respondents believe early marriage has advantages (p<0.001). Factors such as religion, form of education, age of respondents at first marriage and type of family were not found to significantly influence the practice of early marriage (p>0.05).

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents

Variables	Frequency (%)
Age (years)	
30 – 39	10(16.7)
40 – 49	25(41.7)
50 – 59	16(26.7)
60 – 69	7(11.7)
70 – 79	2(3.3)
Total	60(100)
Mean±SD 48.78±9.95	
Tribe	
Hausa/Fulani	53(88.3)
Yoruba	4(6.7)
Igbo	3(5.0)
Total	60(100)
Religion	
Islam	58(96.7)
Christianity	23(3.3)
Total	60(100)
Educational status	
None	8(13.3)
Quranic	12(20)
Primary	9(15)
Secondary	10(16.7)
Tertiary	21(35)
Total	60(100)
Occupation	
Farmer	17(28.3)
Business	22(36.7)
Civil Servant	21(35)
Total	60(100)
Age at first marriage (years)	
17-21	20(33,3)
22-26	30(50)
27-31	6(10)
32-37	4(6.7)
Total	60(100)
Mean±SD 23.83±4.29	
Type of marriage	
Monogamous	27(45)
Polygamous	33(55)
Total	60(100)

Table 2: Perception of respondents on early marriage

Variable	Frequency (%)
Who should decide when a girl should marry in your family?	
Father alone	22(36.7)
Both parents	16(26.7)
The g/parents	13(21.7)
Herself	2(3.3)
All relatives	2 (3.3)
Father and her uncle	1(1.7)
Her uncles	4(6.7)
Total	60(100)
Can you marry out your daughter before the age of 18 years?	
Yes	41(68.3)
No	19(31.7)
Total	60(100)
If yes, why? (N=41)	
To get bride price to help me move out of poverty	1(2.4)
To remove the risk of promiscuity and pregnancy before marriage	11(26.8)
Because my religion allows it	27(65.9)
Because my culture allows it	2(4.9)
Total	41(100)
What is your view on child marriage?	
It is a bad practice	19(31.7)
It is a good practice	37(61.7)
Neutral	4(6.7)
Total	60(100)
Do you think early marriage has any risk?	
Yes	36(60)
No	24(40)
Total	60(100)
If yes, what are the risks? (N=36)	
lack of experience to take care of the newborn	8(22.2)
Denies right to education	7(19.4)
Predisposes to STDs	1 (2.8)
Predisposes to VVF	13(36.1)
Predisposes to maternal death	5(13.9)
It might be against her wish	2(5.6)
Total	36(100)
Do you feel early marriage has any advantage?	
Yes	46(77.6)
No	14(23.3)
Total	60(100)
If yes what are the advantages (N=46)	
Larger family	9(19.6)
Protects virginity	13(28.3)
Strengthens relationship	5(10.9)
Prevents STDs	5(10.9)
Getting husband is more difficult if older	2(4.3)
Prevents unwanted pregnancy	12(26.1)
Total	46(100)
In your opinion, what should be the ideal age of marriage for girls?	
9-11 years	3(5)
12-14 years	14(23.3)
15-17 years	17(28.3)
18-20 years	26(43.3)
Total	60(100)
Do you think government should put law to prohibit early marriage?	
Yes	17(28.3)
No	43(71.7)
Total	60(100)

Table 3: Respondents' views on practice of early marriage

Variable	Frequency (%)
Is early marriage commonly practiced in this community?	
Yes	58(96.7)
No	2(3.3)
Total	60 (100)
If you have ever married out your daughter before 18 years, what was the reason? (N=41)	
Religious belief	30(73.2)
Cultural and traditional belief	3(7.3)
To protect the girl child	5(12.2)
For her to get more children	2(4.9)
Girl physically grown	1(2.4)

Poverty and economic hardship	0(0)
Total	41(100)
If you have ever married out your daughter before 18 years, was it an arranged marriage? (N=41)	
Yes	18(43.9)
No	23(56.1)
Total	41(100)
If yes, who arranged it? (N=18)	
We the parents	15(83.3)
Our parents (their g/parents)	3(16.7)
Village/district head	0(0)
Total	18(100)
Have you ever given out your daughter based on a promise you made to someone?	
Yes	8(13.3)
No	52(86.7)
Total	60(100)
If yes, at what age was she married out? (N=8)	
<18yers	5(62.5)
>18 years	3(37.5)
Total	8(100)
Have you ever married out your daughter against her wish?	
Yes	6(10)
No	54(90)
Total	60(100)
Have you ever witnessed any marriage which you considered early in this community?	
Yes	24(40)
No	36(60)
Total	60(100)
If yes, what was the age (in years)? (N=24)	
9-11	4(16.7)
12-14	14(58.3)
15-17	6(25)
Total	24(100)

Table 4: Respondents views on the complications of early marriage .

Variable	Frequency(%)
Have any of your daughters suffered any complication of pregnancy?	
Yes	10(16.7)
No	50(83.3)
Total	60(100)
If yes, what were the complications? (more than one option chosen)	7(70)
Prolonged obstructed labour	3(30)
Child disability (? Birth asphyxia)	2(20)
Perineal tear	1(10)
Maternal death	1(10)
Psychosocial problem	
Do you think the problem(s) is/are as a result of early marriage?	
Yes	2(20)
No	8(80)
Total	10(100)

Table 5: Factor influencing early marriage

Variable	Early marriage (<18 years)		Test statistics
	Yes (%)	No (%)	
Age (years)			$X2 = 8.189$
0-49	29(82.9%)	6(17.1%)	P=0.006
≥ 50	12(48%)	13(52%)	(Fisher's Exact)
Tribe			
Hausa/Fulani	40(75.5%)	13(24.5%)	$X2 = 10.698$
Others	1(14.3%)	6(85.7%)	P = 0.003 (Fisher's Exact)
Religion			
Islam	41(70.7%)	17(29.3%)	$X2 = 4.465$
Christianity	0(0%)	2(100%)	P = 0.097 (Fisher's Exact)
Form of education			
Non formal	17(85%)	3(15%)	$X2 = 3.851$
Formal	24(60%)	16(40%)	P = 0.077 (Fisher's Exact)
Respondent's age at 1st marriage			
≤20 years	12(85.7%)	2(14.3%)	$X2 = 2.73$
>20 years	26(61.9%)	16(38.1%)	P = 0.185 (Fisher's Exact)
Type of family			
Monogamous	15(60%)	10(40%)	$X2 = 1.275$
Polygamous	23(74.2%)	8(25.8%)	P = 0.258
Who decides when a girl should marry?			
Parents alone	26(72.2%)	10(27.8%)	$X2 = 0.881$
Other relations	12(60%)	18(40%)	P = 0.348

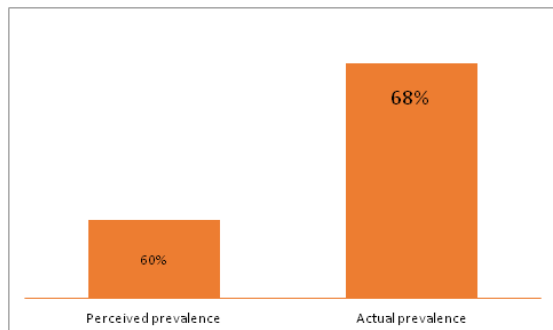| Perception regarding the practice of early marriage			
Good practice	30(81.1%)	7(18.9%)	X2 = 8.74
Bad practice	8(42.1%)	11(57.9%)	P = 0.003
Does early marriage have any advantage?			
Yes	35(83.3%)	7(16.7%)	X2 = 18.45
No	3(21.4%)	11(78.6%)	P <0.001

Figure 1: Perceived versus actual prevalence of early marriage

DISCUSSION

The Respondents' age ranged from 30 to 79 years with the mean age of 48.78 years. Most of the respondents (96.7%) were Muslims and this explains the high prevalence of early marriage in the region. Same observations were made in researches conducted in Bangladesh where majority of those who practiced early marriage were Muslims,[15] and in Ibadan,[16] Nigeria which reported that 88.2% of the respondents were also Muslims. Most of the respondents are Hausa/Fulani (88.3%) and this is so because they formed the major ethnic group in the study area.

This study observed that, up to 51.7% of respondents believe that marriage is early only if it is below 14 years and it points towards a low level of knowledge regarding the cut off age of 18 years. In a study conducted in Dares et Salam, only 5.3% of the respondents said marriage is early if it is below 14 years.[17] Up to 63.3% of the respondents said marriage is not early once a girl has started menstruating while 61.7% said it is not early if she is physically grown up. Ibrahim et al reported in a study conducted in Mali that, 42.5% and 41.1% of respondents believe that marriage is not early if the girl has started menstruating and if she is physically grown respectively.[10] These findings may also be explained by the Islamic background of where these studies were conducted, as these are some of the major signs of physical maturity considered in Islamic faith.

A high proportion (61.7%) of the respondents believe early marriage is a good practice and similar observation was made in a study conducted in Lagos, Nigeria where 67.5% of the respondents said early marriage was good.[18] About 40% of the respondents feel only the father should decide when his daughter should marry; in a study conducted in

Nepal, up to 63% of the respondents had similar views.[19] The ideal age for marriage as expressed by 43.3% of the respondents was age of between 18-20 years for girls. A study conducted in Egypt made similar observation where 36% of the respondents believe age of 18-21 years is ideal for marriage,[20] however, in a study conducted in Mali only 7.2% of the respondents believed 18 years and above is the ideal age for marriage for girls.[10] This study revealed that more than a quarter (26%) of the respondents, believe early marriage is very advantageous because it avoids illegitimate pregnancies.

The prevalence of early marriage was found to be as high as 68.3% and this is not surprising because up to 96.7% of the respondents said early marriage is a common practice in the study area. Similar observation was made in a study conducted in Ibadan, where 70.4% of the respondents reported early marriage as a common practice.[16] Studies in Bangladesh,[15] and Nepal,[20] reported prevalence of 65% and 68.9% respectively and these findings are similar to what we observed in this study. The high prevalence of early marriage observed in these studies could be explained by the religious background (Islam) of majority of the respondents, as early marriage is reported to be more common among Muslims.[22,23] Up to 43.9% of the early marriages observed in this study were based on arrangement and 83.9% of the arranged marriages were arranged by the parents. High prevalence (71.8%) of arranged marriage was also reported in a study in Nepa,[16] however, in a study conducted in Mali, low prevalence of arranged marriage (38.6%) was observed.[10] These disparities in the prevalence of arranged marriage observed in different parts of the world is probably influenced by cultural differences across regions of the world.

Even though the prevalence of early marriage was quite high in this study, most of the respondents (83.3%) did not report any complication regarding early marriage and a similar observation was made in a study in Lagos, Nigeria.[18] Of those that reported complications, prolonged obstructed labour (POL) accounted for 70% of the complications. In Ibadan Nigeria, prevalence of POL was also reported to be high among girls that experienced early marriage.[16] The high prevalence of POL among girls that marry early is not surprising because at this age, most of the girls are not fully developed physically, therefore, they tend to have narrow pelvis which often obstruct the baby during delivery.

Among the factors found to significantly influence practice of early marriage in this study were age of the respondents (P = 0.006) and their tribe (P = 0.003). Perception of respondents regarding early marriage was also important in influencing the practice of early marriage in that, among those that see early marriage as a good thing, 81.1% of them have practiced early marriage (p=0.003). In a study conducted by Sah et al in Nepal, ethnicity was also observed to be a major factor influencing early marriage (p<0.001).[21] Factors such as religion, form of education, age of respondents at first marriage and type of family were not found to significantly influence the practice of early marriage in this study (p>0.05).

CONCLUSION

Majority of the respondents believe early marriage is common in the community and the observed prevalence was also high. Close to two-third of the respondents believe early marriage is good and some of them feel it is not associated with any risk. More than one-third of the early marriages were arranged marriages and the major reasons for the early marriages observed in his study were religious belief and fear of sexual promiscuity/unwanted pregnancy. There should be sensitization of religious/traditional leaders, parents and community members on the dangers of early marriage. Marriage based on promise or arrangement by parents should also be discouraged.

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